

Sons of Thunder, Part 1

Luke 6:14

Today we're looking at the two sons of Zebedee, James and John. Those two brothers, James and John, they belong to that first group of Apostles, that inner circle, and that included two other brothers, Simon and Andrew. James is the older brother. He's always listed first in the list of Apostles, and John is his younger brother tagging along. And of all the Apostles, it was James who was the first to die as a martyr.

The younger brother John, he's the last to die, not of martyrdom, but dying of old age in Ephesus. Both men had been used mightily of the Lord in their lifetime. James had a short life span; John had a long one. They were both used mightily, and for both of them, they were used in ways that no one would have expected or predicted, looking at their young lives.

These two men, they were known for having a strong and brash and thundering set of personalities. They're like two strong bulls crashing through a china shop, smashing everything they come into contact with. We got to get an early hint of that in Mark's Gospel, where in his list of the twelve Apostles, he listed them, and in [Mark 13] Mark 3:16-17, he noted, he noted that, "James the Son of Zebedee and John the brother of James," he noted their nickname. He said, "(to whom Jesus gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder)." Mark translates that Aramaic nickname Boanerges into Greek: Sons of Thunder.

That's a moniker that could refer to the effects of being struck by lightning. They'll leave you there in a smoldering ash heap once they come through. Or it could refer to being loud and volatile, like stomping around as in a house of thunder. These guys are strong men, strong personalities. But you can also see in their strength of personality, you can see that they were deeply sincere men. They were acutely intense; they were extremely focused men. Leader types. The raw material to be very, very useful. But apart from the sanctifying work of Jesus by his Holy Spirit, all that power and force of personality was as destructive, as unrestrained thunder and lightning.

But the Lord intended to do something very different with these two Sons of Thunder: make them useful for Kingdom purposes. So he bridled their natures. He restrained their destructive tendencies, and he channeled their natural energy into something useful through the power of that chief Christian virtue of love. He bound all those loose ends together and put it through the channel and the restraint of *agapé* love.

We've gotta go back to the beginning, though, and see where they started and what they learned along the way. And I tell you, when I hear this, for me personally, because I have a little bit of this in my nature, maybe from some accounts a lot of it, I'm very encouraged to see what God did in their lives, to see how Christ can take any personality, any background, any rough edges, and he can sand it all down and make it useful for his purposes. He channels all things to his good effect, to a heart that belongs to him. That is such an encouragement, beloved.

Some outline points for you to help you jot down a few notes if you'd like. We're going to talk first about their nurture, then about their nature, and then about their future.

Their nurture, their nature, and then their future. First, their nurture. Their nurture. They were sons of Zebedee. They were sons of Zebedee. James and John were originally known because of the prominence of their father Zebedee. Often, they're identified as "the sons of Zebedee," which indicates that Zebedee was a significant man, most likely in connection to his success as a businessman. But beyond that there's evidence that this Zebedee, he wasn't just wealthy and prominent in the Galilee area, but he had a connection to the temple in Jerusalem, perhaps through business connections, more likely probably through family connection in relation to the house of the high priest.

These family connections, the family background, it had a very significant shaping influence on James and John. They're nurtured to be sons of Zebedee, wealthy businessmen from a prominent Jewish family, inheritors of their father's wealth and his influence, carrying on his reputation in the community. James is the older brother; that's why he's always named first. John follows in the list as the younger brother. But as the oldest, James, he seemed to be the more vocal one of the two, the more prominent of the two, and that's usually the way with firstborns.

As the younger brother, John was maybe the more easily dismissed and looked over, standing in the shadow of his older brother. He looked up to his older brother. They were both stamped with that family trait of boldness and strength of personality. The younger brother John, he was quieter, though. He was more contemplative. It's amazing how much more thinking you can do when your mouth is closed, right? You ever notice that? He's the disciple who, like a younger brother, he didn't mind leaning in close to Jesus, leaning back on his chest. He always wanted to be near him, right close to him. That's a younger brother thing, not characteristic of an older brother, but it is of a younger brother, and it actually is to John's credit.

In fact, turn to Mark 9. Let me give you a text, here, just an illustration of John's nature. And as we do this, we'll transition into our second point, that nurtured here as sons of Zebedee there was a certain explosiveness in their character and their nature. They were strong, and they didn't mind letting their voice be heard. They didn't mind making decisions and stepping out and taking the lead, and we get a hint of this in

Mark Chapter 9. In this account, Mark 9, shows John's solidarity with his older brother's nature on the one hand, but also shows a clear sign of John's more sensitive conscience.

There's a spiritual intuitiveness about John that I think is, is precious. We actually see it showing up in his writing as well. But let's start reading there in verse 33. You remember the Transfiguration has just happened, and Peter, James, and John, they were specially selected to join Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration to witness the unveiling of his glory, to see Elijah and Moses with him, standing there on the mountain to hear that voice out of heaven that said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." That is, don't pay attention right now to Moses and Elijah. Listen to him, to Christ. So they were there to witness that.

Inevitably, because that experience came to sinful men, there was pride and quarreling that erupted among the disciples at one point. Take a look a look at verse 33. "When they came to Capernaum, and when he," Jesus, "was in the house, he asked them, 'Hey, what were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about

who was the greatest.” You think Jesus didn’t know that? Hey, what was that topic of conversation? Let’s talk about it now around the dinner table, just have a little friendly discussion about who of you is the greatest.

Jesus, here, he remember in the Transfiguration, he commanded Peter, James, and John, right? “Tell no one what you’ve seen until after the resurrection.” Mark 9:9. But that didn’t stop them whispering about it among themselves. Nor did that prevent them from pondering their privilege, from thinking about, wondering what it must mean that Jesus would specially select them and not the others, but them, for special prominence. It must mean something prominent for the future. So which one of us three is the guy? Jesus rebuked, corrected their thinking. Look at verse 35, “He sat down, called the twelve, and he said to them, ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all, and servant of all.’”

Now being first and most prominent doesn’t sound so great to these worldly-thinking men, right. Last of all, servant of all, that’s the one who’s first. “And he took a child and put him the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to

them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me but him who sent me.'" That is, if you receive a believer like a little child, you receive Christ, and when you receive Christ, you receive the father. You have the whole package; the Triune God is yours.

Child-like humility, servant-hearted sacrifice, gentleness with tender-hearted believers, those are the marks of greatness in Christ's kingdom. How do you and I measure up the that? Of all the disciples, it's John, the sensitive one, the intuitive one; John immediately gets what Jesus is saying. His conscience is, is pricked. It's, it's struck as he remembers an earlier violation, now, as he thinks back, of this principle that Jesus taught, that when he feels compelled at this moment to confess, to clear his conscience with Christ.

Take a look at verse 38. "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.' Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will soon will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I said to you, whoever

gives a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.'”

Now that little vignette, there, stands out for a couple of reasons. First, Mark 9:38 is the only record we have of John speaking out on his own. And when he does speak out, it's to confess sin. It's the sign of a sensitive conscience. That's one that doesn't hide sin. He doesn't cover it over; he doesn't try to dismiss it as significant or negligible. John possessed a spiritual sensitivity, immediately grasping the significance of Jesus' teaching, and he needed to confess. Just a word of application, here.

Always cultivate in yourself a sensitive conscience. The cultivation of a sensitive conscience by listening to it, by conducting a sober-minded, biblically focused self-examination, and then wherever you find sin to be quick to confess it. Train yourself that way, beloved. Train your children that. Train your grandchildren, your great grandchildren to think like that because that quality is absolutely vital and indispensable for spiritual growth. It's called having a teachable spirit.

Second, the nature of what John confessed, that's revealing into his character, isn't it? There's revealed something, here, about his nature. He and his brother had a propensity to be somewhat partisan and exclusive. Our group and no other. You ever meet people like that? They draw that circle so tight they can, only they can stand in it, and even if they're standing in it, it's only on one foot. They're balancing inside that tiny little circle they've created for themselves, and they exclude all others from being true Christians. James and John, they were kind of like that.

They had this, us versus them, mentality, and you can actually see that, that kind of thinking, show up in John's writing, as we read earlier from John 3. You could hear that. He's a very black and white thinker. He expresses himself in antithetical terms. And the problem, there, isn't with being black and white. That's righteous. Problem is with the standard of judgment, his failure to discern friend from foe. That's what Jesus corrected, here. You've got to know these people. The one who is not against us is for us. The one who is practicing

mighty works in my name and giving a cup of cold water in my name for my sake, they belong to me.

But what's revealed, here, about John's nature is his boldness. There's a take charge kind of an attitude, here. The, the guy is driving out demons in Jesus' name, clearly demonstrating power, but because the guy is not a part of their apostolic entourage and following in Jesus' immediate company like they were, as John confessed, he said, Hey, we tried to stop him because he wasn't following with us. There's a unique combination in John, isn't there, of this boldness, this courage to command this guy, shut him down, but also sensitivity.

His older brother James, he seems to be all boldness, very little sensitivity. These boys are zealous for the truth. They're loyal for Jesus Christ, and that's a very good thing. But that zeal can be a double-edged sword that bloodied friend and foe alike. Passion for truth, righteousness, justice, it produced an admirable courage in them to stand up against error, but when that zeal misfired, it was a clear example of how the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. There is

no harvest of righteousness where a passion for truth is not directed by love, by the Spirit of God.

To see that illustrated, turn over to Luke Chapter 9 in verse 51. Luke 9:51. This is the, I think, clearest evidence that James and John were worthy of that nickname Sons of Thunder. The incident recorded in Luke 9:51-56 it follows immediately after John's confession of acting out of that partisan spirit that we just read. You can see, there, in verses 49-50, it's the same account, here. And here in Luke 9:51, there's a dramatic and marked turn in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to die, and Luke depicts Jesus, there, as resolute.

Jesus has steeled his spine, he's set his face like flint, he's marching toward that inevitable appointment with the cross. All his disciples are with him. Read there in Luke 9:51, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up," that is, taken up to the cross, "he set his face to go to Jerusalem, and then he sent messengers ahead of them who went and entered into a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem."

Stop there for a minute. So how did James and John respond to this insult from these godless Samaritans? Well, a lot like Jews. They were also, they also had their cultural prejudices. They were ethnically, culturally, religiously zealous Jews. Look at verse 54, "When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'" We'll take care of this little problem for you. Clean up the map. What are they thinking? They obviously had no qualm of conscience about annihilating the Samaritans. Nuke'em high! That's what they wanted to do. And they thought Jesus would be on board with that, probably even commend their zeal for God, grant them permission to execute. Push the button, my friends. Sons of Thunder, right? And lightning.

Where did this idea come from? Is it natural cruelty? Sadism on their part? No, not at all. They believed, no doubt, that they were thinking and acting out of biblical precedent, that they were doing what was actually zealous and righteous before God. Perhaps they're thinking back to the destruction of

Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities that God had judged with fire and brimstone falling from heaven.

James and John may have had that incident in mind. But perhaps they were thinking of a closer connection, one that the recent sighting of Elijah on the mount of Transfiguration reminded them of. Turn to 2 Kings 1 for a moment. 2 Kings 1. Keep your finger here. Remember, James and John witnessed the Transfiguration. They watched as Jesus is transformed before their eyes, as Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, also in glory. Perhaps they remembered that God used Elijah to judge the Baal worshipers, who lived in that very region. Many of the things that Elijah had done, was, they were reminded by the sights around them, of things Elijah had done.

These Baal worshipers are the predecessors of the Samaritans, the ones whose faithlessness and idolatry resulted in divine judgment. And you may remember how during the reign of wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel that Elijah faced down the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in Samaria. He called down fire from heaven to consume that sacrifice, and then he took those 450 prophets out and slaughtered them with the sword.

Perhaps that's what James and John had in mind. Perhaps they wanted to teach these Samaritan apostates to fear the Lord, just like Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed, and people around them learned to fear the Lord because of that. Or just like what happened with Elijah, and they got some reverence and respect for the great prophet because fire came down from heaven and consumed 102 men.

So maybe James and John are thinking, You know what? This is the Messiah standing in your presence. Have some respect. Right heart, right concern, a zealous concern for the jealous, for the honor and the glory of the Messiah. Perhaps they wanted to see the truth of God vindicated, this messenger of God protected, his honor defended. Look at verse 54 again, "When his disciples, James and John, saw this offense, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village."

Listen, the Samaritan attitude toward Jesus, it was insulting. It was a huge offense. The Samaritan religion, it was apostate, and it always had been. Their idolatry was a stench in God's nostrils. Their cult-like arrogance and opposition toward the Jews, it was utterly deplorable. No excuse for it. But think about some of those who oppose Christianity today. Be mindful of those when you think about this story, that any offense that you feel is real or perceived in our age and in our time and toward us personally or us as a church or us as a people.

It's really pretty minimal when compared to this. But even if we were to experience this, and we will, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. We will suffer persecution. We will suffer marginalization. We will lose jobs and lose money and lose bank accounts. I can guarantee that's gonna happen, so we shouldn't expect anything different. But listen, our attitude can never be one of anger. It can never be one of revenge. It can never be one of let those pagans pay. Not at all! None of this offense is lost on Jesus, is it?

But he had other plans for Samaria, more gracious, more redeeming plans for Samaria. Remember in verse 51, we just read

it, he's heading for the cross. "He set his face to go to Jerusalem," and that's where he would die for the sins of all of his people, including, get this, including some of these very Samaritans. It's in Acts 8:5-8 that we read that Philip the deacon went down to Samaria, and he proclaimed Christ to them.

It says there that the crowds, with one accord, these Samaritan crowds, paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him. James and John, if they had had their way, there would have been no joy in the city. That's because there would have been no people in the city. That's because there would've been no city. They would've reduced Samaria to a smoldering pile of ashes. No Gospel to Samaria because, guess what? No Samaria.

But Jesus, he had plans to save, plans to ransom, plans to rescue. So he rebuked James and John, and they simply went on to another city. Is that a minor convenience that we could endure for the sake of the Gospel? Move on, make different travel plans? Make different arrangements? Is that okay? See people saved? To see much joy in that city? So he rebuked James and John, went on to another city, and then he allowed the coming

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events in the passing of time teach James and John the lesson that they needed to learn, and that's this lesson: Never allow your zeal for truth to turn the mission field into a pile of ashes. Love people, and leave final judgment to God.